

Cinematics: The Ecological Paradigm



Still frame from *Badlands* (1973, Dir. Terrence Malick)

HURC 310, Spring 2016

HNZ 207, Tuesday 1-3:50 pm

Instructor: Ted Geier

Office Hours drop-in/by appointment

Course Description

This course introduces students to the study of film form and asks them to consider the relation of cinema to ecological experience. Topics include screen space, sound effects, camera movement, and the many ways these and other elements can be related in a film to produce meaning. The course will engage select aspects of film production, film theory, and the film industry. The course's opening pretense—ecology—will be interrogated not as a recent critical concern but as a governing cinematic expression before, during, and after the ecocritical turn. This sense of ecology focuses on how film aesthetics always “think” through social and species coexistence, life, death, technology, globality, or even “galacticality” and universality, with or without environmentalism.

Film classes often pair films with readings that “make sense” of the films and guide student discussion. This course proceeds—primarily—through primary source engagement in seminar-collaborative format in order to produce students’ original critical thinking about film, not to apply outside theories. As students proceed through film curriculum as majors, minors, and aficionados, they will of course encounter more of the vast secondary literature on film per their disciplinary and personal needs. In this class, however, students get to practice making sense of things themselves while developing their application of technical film terms. Students will learn and employ important formal concepts such as story/plot synthesis, linearity, diegesis, montage, audience, and more. Such terms and ways of viewing open onto later film theory and modes of critique that students will thus be very well prepared to engage in their future work. Assignments will ask students to show that they have learned film terms and can use them, and in general, this will be part of their developing ideas about environments and ecology. But not always.

Course Materials to Purchase

Film Art: An Introduction, 9th Edition. Bordwell & Thompson. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010.

Film Viewings

Most films and a number of clips will be available via Owl-Space. "Preview" films should be viewed by the date on the schedule, and students should be prepared to demonstrate general familiarity with the contents. "Film" assignments should also be viewed by the date they appear on the schedule, and these will be the primary focus of in-class analysis and discussion. There will be other select in-class screenings as indicated and as necessary throughout the semester.

Writing Assignments/Forum

Students will write a 500-word address of a film/films every two weeks, which they will post in the forum (public to all class members). These will 1. employ relevant readings and formal concepts from Bordwell & Thompson, and 2. present a main claim about the "ecology" expressed in the film(s) discussed. Because there is very little written work in the class, writing and correct use of terms will be graded very stringently from Week 4. No late or make-up work permitted.

Course Schedule

Pre-Class: View *Citizen Kane* (1941, Welles) & read sections from BT on the film (Owl-Space).

Week 1, Jan. 12 Behind the Curtain: "Reading" a Film (well)

Read: BT Ch. 1 "Film as Art" & Ch. 2 "The Significance of Film Form," pp. 2 – 77

Film: In-class screening of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939, Fleming, et al)

Week 2, Jan. 19 Ecocinema, the very idea: Documenting environments

Read: BT Ch. 4 "Mise-en-Scene," pp. 118-166 & pp. 351 – 365

Film: *The River* (1938, Lorentz/Farm Security Administration – link on Owl-Space)

Film: In-class screening of *Still Life* (2006, Jia Zhangke)

Due: Write-Up 1

Week 3, Jan. 26 Establishing shots: Ecological space(s) of Cinema

Read: BT Ch. 5 "Cinematography," pp. 167 – 221

Film: Opening scenes of *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006, Baichwal), *Touch of Evil* (1958, Welles) & *Boogie Nights* (1997, Anderson); "Copacabana" scene from *Goodfellas* (1990, Scorsese – links on Owl-Space)

Film: *Rear Window* (1954, Hitchcock)

Week 4, Feb. 2 More established shots: Ecological Space

Read: BT Ch. 6 "Editing," pp. 223 – 268

Film: In-class selections from *Tree of Life* (2011, Malick), *Gravity* (2013, Cuarón) & *Interstellar* (2014, Nolan)

Film: *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968, Kubrick)

Due: Write-Up 2

Week 5, Feb. 9 The Production of Ecology

Read: BT Ch. 3 "Narrative as Formal System," pp. 78 – 117 & pp. 366 – 382

Preview: *Dog Star Man* (1961-64, Brakhage – link on Owl-Space)

Film: *Solaris* (1972, Tarkovsky)

Week 6, Feb. 16 Manipulation, post-production, and anti-technology technologicistics

Read: BT Ch. 9 "Film Genres," pp. 328 – 348

Preview: *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982, Reggio)

Film: *The Sacrifice* (1986, Tarkovsky)

Due: Write-Up 3

Week 7, Feb. 23 The long take and the short game: impossible existences

Preview: *Children of Men* (2006, Cuarón)

Film: *Play Time* (1967, 70mm version, Tati)

Week 8, Mar. 1 Inescapable Ecologies (Spring Break)

Read: BT Ch. 7 "Sound in the Cinema," pp. 269 – 307

Film: *The Prestige* (2006, Nolan)

Due: Write-Up 4

Week 9, Mar. 8 Surrounded by sound: The registers of experience

Film: In-class selections from *Apocalypse Now* (1979, Coppola) & *American Graffiti* (1973, Lucas); "The Money Exchange" scene from *Jackie Brown* (1997, Tarantino)

Film: *Blow Out* (1981, De Palma)

Week 10, Mar. 15 Auratics: Do You Hear What I Hear?

Read: Interview w/ Ben Burt http://www.moviesonline.ca/movienews_14930.html

Preview: *The Conversation* (1974, Coppola)

Film: *WALL-E* (2008, Stanton et al)

Due: Write-Up 5

Week 11, Mar. 22 The Horror → Eco-Horror

Preview: *Psycho* (1960, Hitchcock)

Film: *JAWS* (1975, Spielberg)

Week 12, Mar. 29 Everyday Eco-Disasters: Bad Films Everyone Saw (& why they're so great)

Preview: *The Happening* (2008, Shyamalan)

Film: *Twister* (1996, de Bont)

Film: *2012* (2009, Emmerich)

Due: Write-Up 6

Week 13, Apr. 5 Eco-Auteur: The Films of Terence Malick

Preview: *Days of Heaven* (1978, Malick)

Film: *The Thin Red Line* (1998, Malick)

Week 14, Apr. 12 Quiet Coexistence and Its Discontents

Film: *[SAFE]* (1995, Haynes)

Due: Write-Up 7

Week 15, Apr. 19 The End of Cinema (class)

Film: *Limbo* (1999, Sayles)